**Hi, my name is Shwu and I’m a Twinkie**

April 30, 2008 by [shwu](http://shirleywho.wordpress.com/author/appleboid/) [6 Comments](http://shirleywho.wordpress.com/2008/04/30/hi-my-name-is-shwu-and-im-a-twinkie/#respond)

About a month ago I had the honor of playing with Down Town Brown (DTB) at the Fools West Ultimate Frisbee tournament in Santa Cruz. Originally a men’s team comprised only of players of color, they have since competed as a mixed gender team, and this tournament marked the first time they had enough women to field a women’s Down Town Brown team. Even given its founding principle of diversity, the team was remarkably diverse, with players ranging in age from 17 to pushing 40, and ethnicities including Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, South Asian (Indian), African-American, Brazilian, Thai, and Cambodian. We even gave a nod to affirmative action and had a white girl (but her story wasn’t so different from many of ours, as we would learn)!

The tournament itself was a lot of fun; not surprising if you consider how many great players we had. Jody Dozono, who won the Callahan back in the day and a veteran handler for Fury. Anna Nazarov, pretty much responsible for UCLA’s huge rise to power. Slap, who is off the ground (usually 3 ft high and horizontal) more often than not. Nancy Sun, my childhood friend and basically my role model for Ultimate, who has a knack for building teams into powerhouses (MIT and Brute Squad). Many others who either have been or are still are rock stars on their respective college teams. Besides Nancy and Slap, I hadn’t played with any of them before, which added to the excitement and novelty. Pickup teams can be hit or miss, but the ones that are a hit usually have something for the players to rally around – whether it be a crazy theme concept like stuffing 15 players into a PortaPotty, a reunion of sorts, or a common love of partying. In this case, the unifying element was the fact that we were all women of color.

After each day’s games, the team gathered into a circle and spent a few hours in the Down Town Brown tradition – each person sharing with the rest of the team their unique experiences and stories. While normally the circle would’ve emphasized being a person of color, this particular circle was made up of women, and so we had a multi-faceted issue on which to reflect: what does it mean to be a woman of color, and how does this affect us? Many people talked about how they’d felt uncomfortable with their ethnicity growing up, how they’d been the only non-white person at school or wished they were white, or how they were embarrassed of their parents, or how they’d been the victim of discrimination. Some described where and how they grew up, where their families came from, and how this has shaped their lives. Others talked about being a woman in male-dominated arenas. There were sad stories, funny stories, angry stories, and, especially, enlightening and inspiring stories. We learned a lot about everyone, and, hopefully, in the process, ourselves.

Clearly, I spent the whole time panicking about what I was going to say. Roshan can attest that every time he says “tell me a story” I’ve got nothing, claiming “I’m not a storyteller.” So I ran through a dozen different potential topics in my head before my turn came, my brain getting all tangled up in all the interconnected story lines, with the end result being that I rambled a lot about not very much and it felt very inconsequential afterwards.

What I talked about was my parents, how they’d come to the US for graduate school, had me and my brothers, how we lived in a school district that was 30% Asian, how I hung out with mostly Asians but not the “cool aZns”, how I went to Chinese school and played hooky during the activity sessions and how our friends’ parents started a “joy luck club” of sorts to “homeschool” us and how I kind of wish I hadn’t lost most of my Chinese language ability given that it was my first language, how my dad would take us to play tennis all the time as kids, how I started playing Ultimate at geek camp and got all my friends to start playing in high school, and how in the beginning I was one of the very few girls who played Ultimate, and that’s how I felt different, but I didn’t mind because it was kind of badass, and that now there are so many girls playing Ultimate and it’s awesome. Uh, what? Can you say, “who cares”? Although I’d wanted to mention most of that stuff, it amazed me in retrospect how little substance my spiel actually had, how trivial what I talked about was. What it really sounded like was “I had it good growing up and I rock.”

What I really wanted to talk about was mostly the first part – that I had it good growing up. Because my discomfort with being Asian is less about being Asian, and more about not being Asian enough. It started around the time we started forming cliques – middle school or so. Although almost all of my good friends were Asian, when the Asians split into the “cool” and “not as cool” Asians, I found myself solidly ambiguous. I had friends who were “cool” and friends who were arguably less, and while I didn’t necessarily suffer any of the miseries attached with being “uncool”, I found myself identifying less and less with “aZns”. They seemed to care about fast cars, fashion, hip hop, and generally acting “ghetto”. I’m exaggerating here, and I had many friends who could be considered part of that crowd, but I guess the crowd overall (aZns the nation over) gave off a vibe that didn’t sit well with me.

So I played Ultimate, listened to alternative punk and emo, hung out with a crowd of similarly fringe folk. In college, I continued to play Ultimate, which led me to hang out with a fairly homogenous group of people – amazingly diverse in activities, but surprisingly uniform in outlook and behavior. Namely, the hippie, socially-conscious type. I carried around Nalgenes, listened to acoustic guitar music and more emo, hung out with fewer and fewer Asians. I dated white guys and started looking like a walking advertisement for American Eagle. In my junior and senior years I participated in the Chinese Students Association and even dated a Chinese guy again, but while I had fun being part of the hip hop dance group and thought the guy was cute, I just didn’t feel like I belonged in those relationships. At some point a few years ago, my brothers asked me why I acted so “white” – listened to white music, dressed like a white person, did white person things like care about the environment; basically, I like almost everything that [white people like](http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.wordpress.com/).

Combine that with the fact that my parents are not your typical Asian parents. Sure, they have high standards, as any parent should, but they did not overtly pressure any of us to do any of the stereotypical Asian things. They of course required that we do well in school (my reward for every good report card was a trip to the bookstore where I could pick out two books – and I thought it was the best reward ever), and started us all on piano, but they didn’t insist we continue with anything if we didn’t want to, and let us pursue what we did. So my older brother tried trombone, my younger brother tried the oboe, and I tried the cello. And eventually I started spending every day playing Ultimate and hanging out with friends. I even dated all through high school. So while my parents expected a lot of us, they never forced us to do anything and didn’t place very many restrictions on us at all. We could grow up and do whatever we wanted, and they would be happy, as long as we were happy and successful.

Of course that’s not how things turned out, necessarily. My older brother still majored in something he didn’t really like because he wanted to please them, then flitted around from teaching to law and now business school, trying to find what he wants to do. My younger brother took the standard computer science route and is now a software engineer at a consulting company. And me, I’m still putzing around getting a PhD in something I started doing because I didn’t know what else to do at the time and didn’t want to go to any more job fairs with my crappy unfocused resume and no idea what job I wanted. I think my older brother and I both feel some guilt for not fully utilizing the rather rare mix of opportunity, ability, and freedom our parents worked so hard to give us, and yet pressed so little upon us.

And so if I am not fully reconciled with my ethnicity, it’s not so much because I feel “different” for having darker skin. It’s because I feel I should feel different, but don’t. It’s because I have the seemingly “white” luxury of agonizing over what I want to do with my life, because I had too many opportunities and never felt pressured to become a doctor or an engineer. It’s because my brothers accuse me of being a Twinkie\* and because I’ve never personally experienced any acts of racism. I don’t feel particularly oppressed. Needless to say, I felt a little out of place in the sharing circle, despite having a face that in all appearances fit in.

So what does being a person of color mean to me? Unfortunately, not much. My conflict comes from having had so little conflict in my life. I guess that’s something to be thankful for, in the grand scheme of things.

\* Twinkie = yellow (asian) on the outside, white on the inside

Post script: I realized after writing this that it sounds like I act totally non-Asian, which I want to clarify is totally untrue. Sure, my tastes in clothes, music, and recreation are not particularly “Asian”, but I take pride in the fact that I can cook reasonably authentic Chinese food, that I am an adventurous eater (tripe, chicken feet, cartilage stir fry, duck blood, jellyfish… delicious!), and I’m generally a cheapskate. Ok, so I don’t hold chopsticks the right way. You’ve got me there…